**Vouchers Do Not Improve Student Achievement: Research Summary**

Multiple studies analyzing public and private school student test score data confirm that when test scores are weighted to reflect socioeconomic level, race, and disability, private schools offer no academic advantage.[[1]](#endnote-1) Evaluations of state voucher plans confirm this conclusion.

**Alabama** The 2013 Alabama Accountability Act requires schools accepting voucher students to administer annually either the state’s own standardized achievement test or a nationally recognized norm-referenced test that measures learning gains in math and language arts, in all grades that the state requires testing for public school students. Despite challenges presented by the lack of uniform testing data, and a limited sample size due to missing data, researchers at the University of Alabama found that voucher recipients:

* Generally failed to meet proficiency benchmarks and performed below average on norm-referenced tests,
* Performed about the same as their public school peers, and
* Did not improve over time in the program.

“[P]articipating in the scholarship program does not, on average, yield a significant improvement on standardized test scores. Generally, the number of years that a student participated in the scholarship program was not correlated with achievement performance.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

**District of Columbia** Studies analyzing the D.C. voucher program consistently conclude that the program does not improve student achievement. Indeed, in 2017, researchers reported that students who left public schools that had not been identified as low-performing experienced statistically significant lower achievement in math and reading when they used a voucher to transfer to a private school. Elementary school students who used vouchers also experienced statistically significant negative impacts in reading and math. Voucher advocates often suggest that such declines are the result of disruption, and that achievement can be expected to improve after students fully transition to their new schools. Researchers controlled for that affect and found that there was “no statistically significant association between changing schools and student achievement.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Florida**

The state of Florida commissioned David Figlio, a Faculty Fellow at the Institute of Policy Research, Northwestern University to conduct a five-year study to determine whether students perform better after transferring to private schools from low-performing public school, with the support of a tax credit voucher..

Figlio found that the gain scores for voucher students were virtually identical to those of income-eligible non-participants who remained in public schools. [[4]](#endnote-4)

Although Figlio suggests that the program improved the performance of Florida *public* schools, any such improvement could also be explained by a variety of other variables, including the transfer of low-performing students from those schools, and/or targeted remedial programs.

**Indiana**

A longitudinal analysis of six years’ worth of student data from the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program (ICSP), found that voucher students “had substantial average achievement loss” in mathematics, and these losses remained entrenched over time. English scores were not statistically different. [[5]](#endnote-5) An earlier study looking at three years’ worth of data found that “voucher students who transfer to private schools experience significant losses in mathematics achievement”, and no gains in English/language arts, despite better attendance records once enrolled in private schools.[[6]](#endnote-6)

**Louisiana**

Vouchers have consistently been proven academically ineffective in Louisiana. In 2010, when vouchers were available only to students in New Orleans, voucher students were less likely than public school students to score proficient in reading or in math.[[7]](#endnote-7) Likewise, in 2013, the cumulative proficiency rating for voucher schools was 41%. Only eight schools scored 75% or higher.[[8]](#endnote-8) In 2014, only 44 percent of the voucher students who took the Louisiana state tests passed them, compared to 69 percent of public school students.[[9]](#endnote-9)

A study of the program after it was expanded state-wide found that although students participating in the Louisiana voucher program are slightly less disadvantaged than the general population of voucher applicants (which could lead one to suspect they would be academically advantaged), attendance at a voucher school actually reduced test scores for voucher students. Indeed, researchers warned, “voucher use substantially boosts the likelihood of failing tests in every subject.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Another evaluation examined the data after three years and found that after one year, voucher students scored an average of 11 percentile points lower in English language arts and 27 percentile points lower in math than their public school peers. After two years, voucher students remained 17 percentile points lower in math. After three years, performance was similar. Voucher advocates suggest the initial poor performance may be attributable to disruption associated with switching schools, and the non-alignment of private school curricula and the state assessment, but an alternative hypothesis is that voucher students experiencing low performance may have transferred back to public schools. [[11]](#endnote-11)

**North Carolina**

Accountability in NC is among the weakest in the nation. The program does not require participating private schools be accredited or state approved, that the school teach a state-approved curriculum, that teachers be licensed or certified, or even that schools remain in operation a minimum number of hours/day, days/year. Schools enrolling more than 25 voucher students must report publicly the percentage of test-takers who performed above and below the 50th percentile on a nationally standardized assessment of reading, language arts, and math.

In 2014-15, only six schools reported data, for 172 students (14% of all voucher students). Of that number, 54% scored below in reading, 53% scored below in math, and 48% scored below in language.

In 2015-16, 34 schools reported data for 817 students, but due to enrollment increases, this still represented only 22% of all voucher students. Of that number, 55% scored below in reading, 53% scored below in math, and 54% scored below in language. **[[12]](#endnote-12)**

**Ohio**

The pro-voucher Fordham Institute studied Ohio’s EdChoice voucher program, and based on ten years’ worth of student data, found that “students who use vouchers to attend private schools have fared worse academically compared to their closely matched peers attending public school.”[[13]](#endnote-13) This is despite the fact that students who use vouchers are relatively less disadvantaged than students who are eligible for vouchers but choose not to use them, and are also somewhat higher achieving.

The only longitudinal study evaluation of the Cleveland voucher program also found that voucher students tended to come from families that were less disadvantaged than their public school peers. That study found no consistent pattern either of enhanced or diminished academic achievement for voucher students. While students in public school and voucher schools were likely to experience similar class size and teachers with similar years of experience, the public school students were more likely to have teachers who were certified, and had completed graduate coursework.[[14]](#endnote-14) An evaluation of the data by another researcher confirmed that voucher students experienced no academic advantage, and indeed found a slight advantage in math for students in Cleveland public schools.[[15]](#endnote-15)

**Wisconsin** A 2012 longitudinal study on students enrolled in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) found little differences between voucher students and those attending Milwaukee Public Schools overall. Reports released by the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based at the University of Arkansas, found that:

* Voucher students in elementary and middle school outperformed a matched sample of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) students in reading in the fifth year of the program.
* A sample of low-income MPS students scored higher on average than voucher students in 4th grade reading, math, and science, and in 8th and 10th grade math.
* Voucher students scored higher than the MPS sample in 8th and 10th grade reading and science.

A state audit of the study revealed that only 17.5% of voucher students remained in a voucher school after five years, while 43.5% of Milwaukee Public School students remained in MPS for the five years of the study. State auditors excluded students who switched, while SCDP researchers continued to include former voucher students as if they were still enrolled in the program.[[16]](#endnote-16)

In the 2013-14 school year, public school students in Milwaukee and Racine again outscored their voucher school peers.[[17]](#endnote-17)

**NOTES**

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   [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Louisiana Legislative Auditor, Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program, Department of Education, Performance Audit, December 11, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
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